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ABSTRACT

The Concordia University Inner City Youth (CICY) program links university students with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds in a way that is beneficial to both groups. Through the project, students in Concordia's Leisure Studies Program provide recreation activities for youth from Montreal's inner-city areas. Positive leisure experiences offer youth an opportunity for satisfying involvement with others and provide a sense of acceptance and security that leads to well-being. The literature suggests that unstructured time may be undesirable for adolescents, as it has been associated with deviant behavior and alcohol abuse. The CICY includes activities such as sports, drama, outdoor adventure, dance, and arts and crafts. The program is carried out through a partnership among Concordia University, a school board in Montreal, community organizations, and university student volunteers. The program offers a select group of university students an opportunity to combine academic study with on-the-job professional training. The university students act as mentors and positively influence the youth because they are different from many traditional authority figures. In 1993-94 over 500 inner-city youth, aged 6-16, were involved at 18 sites. Many teachers and school officials report anecdotally that there are positive impacts from leisure participation. Program evaluation includes site visitations, daily evaluation, instructor evaluation of student volunteers, school board evaluation, and community center evaluation. (KS)

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Monograph on Youth in the 1990s. Issue #4, 1995

Partners in Programming: Concordia University Inner City Youth Project

Lisa Ostiguy, Robert Hopp, & Randy Swedburg

Introduction

The Concordia University Inner City Youth (CICY) is a program that is designed to link university students with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, in a way that is beneficial to both groups. This ongoing project taps into the experience and enthusiasm of students in Concordia's Leisure Studies Program, utilizing those students to provide recreation activities for youth from Montreal's inner city areas.

Although the meanings given to leisure and recreation are neither ambiguous nor universally agreed upon (Godbey, 1985), there is a general consensus that recreational activities are not only ends, providing immediate gratification and enjoyment, but also a means for attaining long range personal goals and social goals (Willits & Willits, 1986). Kleiber Larson and Csikszentmihalyi (1986) and Mobily (1989) identified recreational activities to be very important to the adolescent because they provide opportunities to explore and form her or his own identity, potency and autonomy. For youth, recreational participation is often seen as part of the learning process where individuals seek to establish their own identity and acquire knowledge of their sociocultural environment, practice their social behavior and cooperative skills, achieve specific intellectual or physical attainments and also explore a variety of peer, family and continuity roles (Iso-Ahola, 1980).

Over the past twenty-five year the importance of leisure or recreational activities for youth has been well documented (Mobily, 1989; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991). However, most of the existing documentation focuses on middle class youth in suburban settings, with little empirical evidence on the benefits of leisure for youths from urban areas. There are a number of special problems that affect the leisure patterns

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of youth in the inner city. Many are economically disadvantaged, which may result in the lack of opportunities for constructive play, little access to programs outside of school, lack of open space, toys, equipment and, inadequate supervision and child care. This makes it difficult to judge whether existing studies that do not focus on inner city youth are relevant to inner city youth. A review of the literature reveals numerous studies that have examined youth leisure experiences (Roberts, 1983; Maton, 1990; Raymond and Kelly, 1991). Many articles highlight elements of existing programs for inner city, urban or at-risk youth (Fairfax, Wright and Maupin, 1988) however, very few studies have examined the effects of recreation or leisure as an intervention technique.

There is a strong emphasis in the literature on the negative impact of free time for youth, implying that it leads to deviant behaviour. Larson and Kleiber (1991) found that deviant activities are common in adolescent leisure behaviour. Leisure and free time, by themselves are not necessarily positive for an adolescent, nor is it certain they will produce positive results. For adolescents, the absence of meaningful free time can have severe psychological effects and can lead to developmental problems (Larson and Klieber, 1991). Preliminary evidence suggests that much adolescent negative behaviour is motivated by lack of arousal or the need to challenge (Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991). It is important to investigate leisure attitudes and experiences in order to understand the leisure needs and interests of youth in the inner city. Leisure preference may be a product of individual histories of learning and socialization (Crawford, Godbey and Crouter, 1986).

In a more social-psychological discussion of leisure, Iso-Ahola and Manell (1985) emphasize that leisure choices and actions are socially affected. People continue to revise leisure goals, patterns and habits in response to their social environment. There is evidence that over half of the activities important to adults are those learned in childhood. Godbey (1985) concluded from the considerable evidence that the bulk of the recreation skills used by adults are learned before the completion of one's schooling. A crucial factor in whether or not an individual will participate as an adult is the quality of exposure they receive during childhood and adolescence. Economically disadvantaged youth have access to fewer leisure opportunities and as a result have fewer leisure choices to fill their free time. There is a need to increase the repertoire of experiences through the provision options for youth in the inner city: to develop positive leisure behaviours as adults.

Positive leisure experiences can offer youths an opportunity for satisfying involvement with others and provide a sense of acceptance and security that leads to well being. Psychologists who have done extensive research with adolescents have examined the relationship between their recreational habits and their emotional and social development. Studies have found that self image of youth is closely tied to their involvement in leisure activities (Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991).

There are serious problems with respect to the use of free time by today's adolescents. The lack of productive opportunities often leads to excessive television watching and as previously mentioned antisocial leisure behaviour. Figures from Statistics Canada (1991) indicate that 15-19 year olds spend an average of 18.6 hours weekly in front of the television. Youth from more advantaged families have more leisure opportunities, special classes, and easier access to transportation. Inner city youth have fewer opportunities to participate in leisure programs. A lack of leisure skills combined with restricted opportunities is likely to cause feelings of boredom in leisure which in turn may give rise to delinquency and drug use in free time (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger, 1987).

Unstructured time may be undesirable for adolescents. Iso-Ahola and Crowley (1991) found that if adolescents lack personal leisure skills and are constrained from participating in meaningful recreational activity, boredom results. Orcutt (1984) found a positive correlation between boredom and alcohol abuse among female college students. Wasson (1981) found a positive correlation between boredom and deviant behaviour in both male and female college students. One attempt of this study is to counterbalance the too much time and lack of leisure skills and opportunities of urban youths by providing them with avenues to enhance their leisure experience, in both quality and variety. The CICY has taken steps toward providing these avenues to some disadvantaged youths in the Montreal area.

Purpose of the Program

The CICY has established a permanent structure that offers free leisure services to pre-adolescents and adolescents in the inner-city of Montreal. The program includes activities such as sports, drama, outdoor adventure, dance, and arts and crafts. Youths are provided with a range of positive experiences to help with the realization that such opportunities can be used as vehicles to fulfilling dreams. An ongoing developmental program

guides them through the many transitions from childhood to young adulthood. The goal is to help these individuals become positive contributors in our society.

The program is carried out through a partnership with the Concordia University, Department of Leisure Studies, a school board in Montreal, community organizations and university students volunteers. Concordia University students animate all the activities. One of the important aspects of the program is the interaction between the university students and the youths and the university student mentors. The mentor type of relationship establishes a certain trust between university students and youths. Such a relationship serves as the foundation for providing other basic and required services to youth, including tutoring and counselling.

Description of the Program

Between 1988 and 1992 a number of pilot programs were initiated in order to establish a link between university students and youth in the inner city schools. As a result of these pilot projects, Concordia University students as part of a 6-credit academic course plan and implement recreational programs for youth in inner city schools.

The CICY offers a select group of university students an opportunity to combine academic study with on the job professional training. The university students have an opportunity to experience the practical aspects of theory based education.

The CICY focuses on giving children and youth extra attention outside of the classroom. The use of university students as role models, helps to bridge the generation gap between parents and teachers and youth that is sometimes an obstacle to learning. The university students acting as mentors positively influence the youth because they are different from many traditional authority figures.

The burn out rate of teachers and social workers in the inner city community is high. The lack of resources and budget cut backs makes it a challenge to offer unique recreational opportunities. The university students provide a fresh approach to offering unique leisure programming for youth, stimulating interest.

In 1993-94 over 500 inner city youth, ranging in age from 6-16 were involved at 18 sites. There were over 50 university students who participated in the project.

The programs are primarily offered at schools in areas identified by the school board as inner city. Inner city schools are located in areas where there is a high percentage of families with low incomes. The school programs are held before school, at lunch time, and after school. In order to reach youth away from school, programs are also operated week nights and weekends in community and teen-drop in centres.

Programs at each site are selected based on a number of factors, including:

A) Facilities- What space is available? Many of the inner city schools do not have spaces to operate programs for large groups.

B) Interests of youth- At the beginning of each school year, the youth are given a chance to give input on their programming interests.

C) School board and community center needs- At some schools and community centres, programs are ongoing (such as after school sports and arts and crafts classes.) CICY provides capable leaders for these activities.

D) University students and volunteers- Whenever possible, the program tries to utilize the special leisure skills of the university student or volunteer. Individuals are matched with programs they feel comfortable leading.

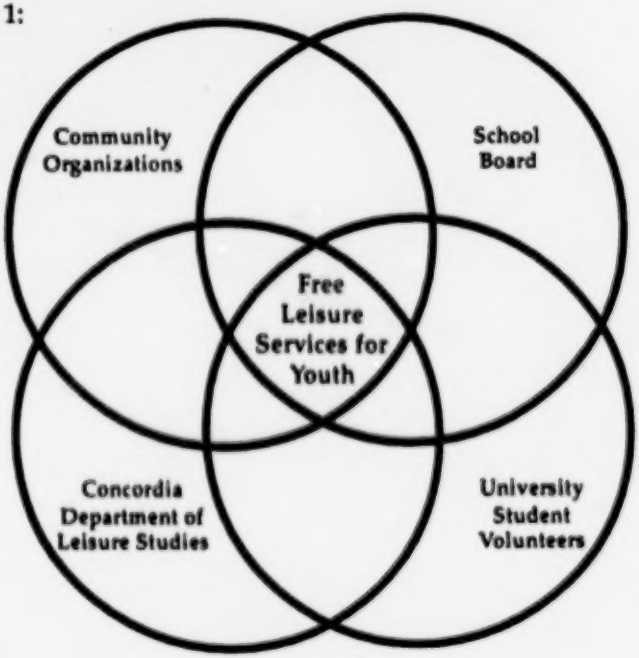
E) Resources- Every effort is made to share resources. Most of the equipment and supplies come from the schools or the community centers. Concordia University provides the equipment and fees for special projects (such as outdoor adventure programs, photography, fashion shows and craft programs) through fund raising efforts and grant support.

Program Partnership

The CICY is a success due to the partnership of four groups; Concordia University department of Leisure Studies, University students

and volunteers, a school board in the greater Montreal area, and up to ten community organizations.

Figure 1:



Providing leisure services is difficult in times of economic uncertainty and limited resources. The partnership results in the successful sharing of resources. Each group offers something to the program and in return receives benefits creating a situation where everyone wins. Table 1 highlights the contributions and benefits for each program partner.

Another result of the partnership is that free leisure services are offered for youth. Unique youth programs that could not otherwise be offered are now available. Included are outdoor activities, cooperative games, hobbies, and other recreational skills. By using the school as a home base for many programs, the youths are encouraged to come to school to participate in activities that they enjoy. As a result youths now associate positive experiences with the school.

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Table 1: Project Partners Contributions and Benefits

Partner	Contributions	Benefits
School Board	Provides facilities and equipment for programs Provides staffing to assist with the supervision of the programs Provides information on the needs and interests of Inner City Youth	Diverse programs for 400-600 inner city youths at the schools including before and after school and lunchtime programs
Concordia University Student Volunteers	Volunteer time to plan, develop and implement programs	Develop an understanding of the needs and interests of inner city youth Develop leadership and programming skills Opportunity to apply theory to practice
Concordia University Department of Leisure Studies	Offers course on Adolescent Recreation Organizes Volunteer Scheduling Fundraising for Special Programs Evaluation of the project, including program evaluation and impact on youth	opportunity to directly impact the delivery of community leisure services Opportunity to carry out research that will contribute to a theoretical understanding of the impact of leisure services on youth
Community Organizations	Provides facilities and equipment for programs Provides staffing to assist with the supervision of the programs Provides information on the needs and interests of Inner City Youth	Increased program offerings on weeknights and weekends

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The program also offers university student role models as program leaders. This mentoring of youth by students reinforces the importance of continuing an education. The university students also benefit greatly from the experience. It is an opportunity to bridge theory presented in class with practice. Many of the students continue to volunteer after the university school year finishes.

The links between leisure participation and academic success are difficult to measure. However, many teachers and school officials report anecdotally that there is an impact from leisure participation changes attitudes, self confidence and behaviour have been identified. As part of the program, and as a result of support from the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Concordia University department of Leisure Studies will begin to examine the longitudinal impact of recreation participation on "stay in school" related activities. The research will focus on measuring the impact of recreational activities on self esteem and leisure attitudes. This project has been mainly funded through grants from Employment and Immigration Canada, and has also conducted private fundraising ventures to supplement its expenses.

Evaluation of the Program

The program is evaluated using a number of different methods including:

1) **Site visitations**: Each program is visited at least once a week by the program coordinator in order to supervise and provide on site feedback to the university volunteers.

2) **Daily Evaluation**: Each university student/volunteer is required to submit a daily report on attendance and gender breakdown, specific daily activities, comments, problems and/or suggestions.

3) **Instructor Evaluation:** Students in the adolescent recreation course are evaluated by their professor , who supervises the experience.

4) **School Board Evaluation:** A designated school official makes random observations and provides feedback to the program coordinator.

5) Community Center Evaluation: The community centers, which have university students/volunteers, carry out monthly program quality evaluations.

The CICY continues to grow through the offering of developmental opportunities for inner city youth, and rewarding education experiences for university students and volunteers. This exemplary youth intervention strategy is still in its infancy. As additions and refinements to the project are seen, a model, (applicable to other inner cities, where a university program in Recreation/Leisure Studies is found, is emerging.

Additional research is needed to determine the limits of the parameters which can be applied to this model. However, it does not appear that these limits will be reached in the near future.

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